

## Op-Ed: International Women's Day

March 8 is International Women's Day. This year, it also marks the 15th anniversary of the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing. Fifteen years ago, 189 countries signed on to a Platform for Action that affirmed the need to work for women's equality in access to education, healthcare, jobs, credit, and more. It stressed the need to have women participate fully in the economic and political life of their countries, and to protect women's right to live free from violence. It was at this conference that then-First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton declared: Human rights are women's rights, and women's rights are human rights.

In the spirit of that conference, the United States has been working to integrate "women's issues" into mainstream foreign policy. We recognize that it is a human rights issue when mass sexual violence is used as a tool of war in the ongoing conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It is a human rights issue when women are excluded from the peace negotiations that affect their lives. And it is a human rights issue when women and girls are held like chattel by human traffickers and when girls are forced into child marriages.

Women's rights are human rights, and women's issues are human issues. They cut across traditional spheres of concern, and they are central, not peripheral. They are international development issues: Study upon study has shown that aid given to women is reinvested in their communities, and skills-development programs turn women into drivers of economic growth. And they are peace and security issues: When women are targeted in conflicts around the world, societies fray and destabilize; the places that most exclude women from public life and seek to constrain their lives are the same in which extremist ideology finds a receptive home. The status of women is a bellwether for the political and economic health of nations.

Women's issues are a critical component of the most urgent transnational problems we face today, and they should be on the agenda of everyone, men and women, from the grassroots to the policymaking levels, in political life and beyond. Violence against women is endemic around the world. Ending it requires everyone's participation, including an active and vocal role for men and for religious leaders of both sexes. The United States is supporting programs around the globe in order that their voices will be heard.

Despite the pledge made in 1995 by so many countries to end the discrimination that robs the world of the talent it desperately needs, women are still the majority of the world's poor, unhealthy, underfed, and uneducated. To the silent majority around the globe that supports women's equality, we say: The time to translate support into action is now.

We look forward to the time when International Women's Day will be a historical and retrospective celebration of women's path to the achievement of equality – when every day belongs equally to women and to men, and every day is a good day for human rights.